

An Island of Certainty

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I've been reading a book about past pandemics, and the author was noting how much hearsay determines people's behavior, the rumors that were passed around. And she said, at least now we have science. We know about germs; we know about viruses. We have some knowledge that can protect us. But at the moment, there're still a lot of things that science doesn't know, and we can't wait for science, because in some cases our lives are at stake, the lives of our loved ones are at stake, our survival is at stake. So we fill in the blanks. We listen to information, hoping that it's not misinformation. It's really hard to tell. Sometimes things are said by people with the greatest authority, and then a few days later they turn around and say the opposite. Or someone else debunks them, and then someone else debunks the debunkers.

In the midst of all this, we have to find some security, something we can depend on. We have to be very careful to figure out what's worth preserving and what we may have to let go. The mind, the state of the mind, is what we have to preserve. And that's something we can know directly—as long as we don't lie to ourselves. As Ajaan Chah said, one of the first things you learn as you watch the mind is how quickly it lies to itself. So as you look around and realize you can't depend on a lot of the information coming in from outside, where you don't know how you're going to filter things out, but when you look inside, you realize that there's something that can be done here. You can straighten out the mind. You can teach the mind how to talk truth to itself. And you have to start with something that's really certain.

Ajaan Fuang noted how it's easy for the mind to start doubting everything. When you look at your breath, when it comes in you know it's coming in, and when it goes out you know it's going out. If you decide you want to doubt that, then there's no hope for you. So at the very least, hang on here. If you watch the breath as it comes in, you know you're with something that you can really know. When you watch the breath as it goes out, you're with something you can really know. If you don't want to go any further in the breath meditation, or you don't feel secure about going any further quite yet, just stay with this.

But ask yourself if it's comfortable. Here again you may have some doubts, so you can experiment. Think of the Buddha. How did he come to knowledge? How did he gain an awakening? When Mara kept telling him that it was impossible, or even after his awakening, Mara kept saying, "No, you haven't awakened, you still

have this, this, this,” and there was nobody else out there to confirm his awakening, the Buddha had to have trained himself to be reliable enough, and he had to train the mind to be circumspect and all around so that his knowledge really was certain.

He did that by experimenting. With experiments, you don't just sit there and watch. You poke. You prod. As with the breath: You can try longer breathing for a bit, and you can ask yourself: What different ways are there of lengthening the breath? The least obtrusive is simply to think, “longer breathing.” See how the body responds. Then think, “shorter breathing,” and see how the body responds. Then you ask yourself which one you prefer right now. You're not making a value judgment forever—simply, which feels best right now.

Then you can try deep, shallow, heavy, light, fast, slow. Try focusing on different parts of the body. Notice how you visualize the breath to yourself and ask yourself if that visualization is helpful. Can you think of others? There are plenty of ideas available. You can think of the body as a sponge. You can think of the body as a mist of atoms. You can think of breath channels going through the body. You can think of a cocoon of energy around the body. And ask yourself: What works?

After all, all of these things are assumptions, but assumptions can be tested. Now, with the assumptions we may have about the virus out there, it's hard to test a lot of them, because we don't have the means or the information. But you can test, you can experiment, with your own breath and your own mind and how they get along together. If you teach them to get along together well, then you have something that's solid, something that's sure, something that's certain inside.

This can then become the basis for more sure knowledge. As you stay with the breath, you begin to watch the mind at the breath: first with the perceptions dealing with the breath, and also with the thoughts that come wandering through. Why is it that when you've made up your mind to stay with the breath, something else comes in and immediately you go? When was the choice made? Sometimes it was made before you went, but then you hid it from yourself. So look for that. As soon as you begin to see the mind beginning to wander off, stop it. Drop it.

It may be quiet for a while, but then it'll sneak out again. See if you can catch it more and more quickly. That way, you learn about the steps in the stages in how the mind fashions a thought, or fashions a fabrication. At first it's hard to say whether it's a thought or physical sensation. It's right on the boundary line between the two. Then there comes a point where the mind decides, “This is a physical sensation,” and you deal with it that way. Other times, it decides, “This is a thought, a thought about x .”

The mind is very opportunistic. As soon as it gets an excuse to think about something it's been wanting to think about, then finds some fabrication someplace in the body and says "This is it," and you go with it. Other times, it's simply a matter of random memories coming up. You may decide you want to go with them as well: something you haven't thought about for a long time. And again, to go there, the mind has to create all kinds of things.

It's in the creation of these fabrications, the elaboration, the embroidering of the fabrications, that we begin to lie to ourselves. So you drop those. As soon as you recognize them, you drop them. You're trying to look at things from the point of view of there being simply name and form—in other words physical phenomena and mental phenomena in the present moment—without going into them and turning them into a state of becoming. After all, remember the Buddha's dilemma the night of his awakening. He realized that any craving that led to becoming was going to lead to suffering. But craving for non-becoming—in other words, to destroy a state of becoming that's already there, or to see it destroyed—would lead to becoming, too.

What is becoming? It's the act of taking on an identity in a world of experience.

So there was this dilemma. His way out was to look at the fabrications that go into becoming before they formed an identity, before they formed a world. He did that by looking at them simply as events, name and form—mental events, physical events—right here in the present moment. That way, he was able to get past the dilemma.

So it's good to practice that skill now, even though we haven't reached the point of being on the threshold of awakening the way the Buddha was on that night. We can practice the skill, learning how to see things that are happening in the body and the mind simply as that: events, right here, right now. That knowledge you can take as something you can rely on. The less the embroidery, the less the elaboration, then the closer you are to the truth. Figure out how it is that the mind wants happiness, it sticks its intention into the machine of its actions, and yet out comes a little monster in a can. In other words, we want happiness. We think we can set some trains of thought in motion that will lead to happiness, but then they come out with pain, suffering, disappointment. What's there in the machine that does this?

This is something we have to figure out, and we figure it out by watching the steps as quickly and as carefully as we can. The breath provides us with an anchor to stay in the present moment, so that we can keep pulling ourselves back. It gives you your island of certainty in the midst of what outside is a sea of mistrust—and

what for all too long has been a sea of mistrust in the mind itself. You want that island of certainty to grow. So, nurture it, look after it. Stay as directly in touch with it as you can. As the Buddha said, the self is its own mainstay. Who else could your mainstay be?

Make the mind reliable so that it can be its own mainstay. That way, it won't be washed around by the waves in that that sea of doubt. The information from outside comes, the information from outside goes. As long as we have something solid and sure inside, the waves can wash in, they wash away, but they can't erode that island of certainty inside.